

China's Space Capabilities

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China has been working persistently towards gaining a strong foothold in the space arena. The Chinese leadership and the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) serious efforts towards attaining space capability began after 1991 Gulf War. According to a report by CSIS, "General Xu Qiliang, the commander of the People's Liberation Army Air Force, has argued that space exploration is critical to China's national security interests". This war showcased the changed nature of warfare transforming the rules of engagement. The United States' dominance and use of space capabilities radically changed the nature of conventional warfare. China has been asserting and advocating that the only way to counter the United States is to develop a deterrent to its space assets. Another important factor which plays a vital role in the Chinese space programme has been the US' support to Taiwan. In case of a conflict over Taiwan the United States will have an asymmetric advantage because of its dominance in the space arena. Beijing has been worried about this dynamics and is thus looking at space technology with a renewed interest.

The Chinese achievements of the last fifteen years in space technology are noteworthy. China is the third country in the world to achieve feats like space walk (2008), anti satellite test (2007) and to work on a Space Station (2011). Apart from these the successful testing of their navigations system is also path breaking. China has also successfully tested the Shenzhou 9 manned spacecraft in June 2012. With such ground breaking advancements, US concerns about rapid development of China's space technology that came to the fore after the Chinese conducted the ASAT test in 2007, are intensifying.

The Chinese achievements have direct relevance to the global community. Till date China has released 3 white papers relating to the space programmes in, 2000, 2006 and 2011. These papers showcase a long-term plan, which Beijing has adopted. This further tilts the favour on Beijing side. With regular budget cuts by the United States this clearly shows that it may not be long before China comes at par with the United States or even surpasses it. The Chinese government has used the space programme to strengthen nationalists' sentiments. The advancements made by China in space are portrayed by Beijing as national achievements and a logical road to the nationalists goal of space and international supremacy.

The government is threatened with the level of technological development that the United States enjoys in space. On the other hand, Beijing also understands the commercial aspect for technological development in Space. However, there is a general perception that the speed of Chinese development may lead to a 'space war' between China and United States. The primary factor behind this is the United States attempt to showcase its ASAT capabilities after the Chinese ASAT test. On the other hand, this is threatens the regional countries especially Japan, South Korea and India. This threat is further exaggerated with the success of the Beidou system, successfully tested in December 2011. Beidou system provides Beijing with independent navigation system, an alternative to the Global Positioning System (GPS). According to *China Daily*, Beijing has announced that it will be able to provide services to the entire Asia Pacific region by the end of 2012. It further states that, "Beidou will eventually become a global satellite positioning and navigation system that can compete with the United States's GPS in 2020, with more than 30 orbiters". It also reported that, "countries like Pakistan and Mongolia have shown strong interest in the system". This development has given rise to arguments that in case of a conflict Beijing may decide to harm the GPS, an act that will affect a large number of countries. Secondly, the growing credibility of China with respect to space technology also hampers the United States. Chinese space industry is becoming very important for Beijing with respect to monetary gains as well. More countries are using the Chinese platforms for launching satellites. China has launched satellites for countries like Pakistan, Nigeria and Bolivia. According to Space.com, "Chinese rockets sent more commercial payloads into space than the United States, in the year 2011".

These developments clearly show a pattern that Beijing has adopted with respect to space technologies. These developments worry the United States, as it is known fact that space technologies are generally dual-use in nature. It would not be wrong to say that, the more Beijing acquires proficiency with respect to space technologies its military becomes stronger. Beijing has adopted the new found knowledge that the next arena of global battlefield is space, a development that worries Washington immensely. The recent visit to the International Space Station by American, Japanese and Russian astronauts may be an indication of the fact that there is a need for international cooperation to face the emerging Chinese ‘challenge’ in space.

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